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Family Tree

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Family Tree

John Van Rys

Second Generation Immigrant—
the badge and brand I wear in a still life
portrait, though moving still, Cain-like.
All ancestral syllables are lost
at sea: luggage discarded overboard
by emigrating parents to keep
hope afloat voyaging.

Opa, though, visited my childhood, aged,
exotic European man, delivered
courtesy KLM jet. He knew no English,
but sang nonsense, conducting
with his hands.

Elbow to elbow breaking bread, he gestured
his life with squared timber fingers,
clean nails, white hairs a frost-clad forest
between his knotted knuckles and
across the backs of
his hands.

His hands would move to his face, wrinkled,
finely grained, and remove from his mouth
False Teeth, and place their plastic grin
before us for inspection.

I saw his hands grasp
between thumb and two fingers
the arms of his black plastic glasses,
lay those second eyes before him,
while ten fingers curled
into two knotted fists rubbing sockets.

His hands would place white heart powder
on his wide tongue. This ghostly organ
he spooked out at his grandchildren.

(Oma frowned, spat Dutch syllables, like
throatfuls of tobacco juice.)

Opa's heart was diseased,
the tap going rotten while
limbs and twig fingers danced.

After Opa died, I learned
in the old country
his hands made cabinets.

Far in this new country now,
double immigrant, my mouth
tongues sawdust, lungs
sponge up wood's grain, fingers receive
splinters with a joyful shock, from trees
dead now, alive then like him.